

Saving Faith

Preached on The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Sept. 18, 2022
Text: Luke 17: 11-19

The setting of St. Luke's Gospel is the long journey to Jerusalem. Along the way Jesus moved in and out of Jewish territory, teaching, healing and casting out demons. It is the way his disciples would carry on with his ministry after his Ascension. Jesus worked so many miracles in his short ministry that St. John put a disclaimer at the end of his Gospel where he stated that had he recorded all of Jesus' mighty acts, the world could not contain the required books.

We easily assume that any person who has experienced a healing or witnessed some great miracle performed by Jesus would naturally be "saved" for good. It would also be reasonable to assume that those who were healed by Christ would have constituted the original Church in Jerusalem after Pentecost. But those assumptions are wrong. It appears—astonishing as this is—that most of the people who witnessed and even were first-hand beneficiaries of his grace and mercy, in fact did not end up following Jesus. Thousands and thousands of people were direct recipients of miracles at the hand of Jesus. How could a person experience a miracle at the very hand of Jesus and not follow him for the rest of their life in certain faith?

Let us look at this notion of certain faith for a moment. There are different kinds of faith and there are different types of certainty. For example, there is mathematical certainty and that is just about as pure as certainty gets. But there is also logical certainty that is very much like mathematical certainty. Of course, the most certain statements of all are tautologies; but the problem with tautologies is that they are matters of definition and provide no new information. However, when a woman says, "I am certain that my husband loves me," she is not applying mathematical certainty or logical certainty to her affirmation of love, nor is she declaring a tautology. But she is making a claim that is confident and full of conviction.

Now many people would say that she has "reasons of the heart," by which they mean she has no reasons at all. This is a very common view among moderns, given the still strong belief that the only certainties are mathematical, logical, or those established by empirical science. Though the latter has taken serious hits recently, there is still a large percentage of the population who are not ready to dispense with the idea that there are plain facts that exist regardless of what anyone thinks, and everything else is subjective. Whether this facile distinction is correct is an issue for a different occasion.

But when we are not acting as theoreticians, we make all sorts of claims which we are rightly certain about, but which do not fall neatly into the categories of tautology nor

pure science. Absent some illness or cognitive disorder, we are quite certain in our normal perceptions and recent memories. If we had breakfast this morning, we know what we ate, but we can't prove that in a lab; we cannot isolate a memory and examine it in a petri dish. If our vision is good, or corrected, and we are not otherwise distracted, we know there is a stop sign coming up. We cannot prove that in a rigorously philosophical way, but we know it is true. Beyond simple perceptions, we can also make quite confident inferences about the world. If a beginning carpenter is shaking when up on scaffolding and hasn't displayed this behavior on the ground, we know he or she is not used to heights yet. If, however, an experienced carpenter quite comfortable with heights is shaking, then we make the confident inference that something else is going on. Too much coffee? Licit or illicit drugs? Some mysterious psychological trigger? We might not know the cause, but we know something other than simple fear of heights is going on.

Returning to the woman who is certain her husband loves her, we can say she does have good reasons for believing that. Those reasons are no doubt complex, but it is unlikely she arrived at them through some mystical vision. Rather, her certainty is born of long experience within which she has witnessed congruence between her husband's words and his deeds. By doing things for her and making sacrifices, he demonstrates that he cares for her well-being. He doesn't merely declare his love occasionally, while treating her with consistent indifference the rest of the time.

But what about faith, especially religious faith? Surely this is an area that swings free of the normal ways we know and perceive. This radical separation between faith and knowledge is so taken for granted today that people don't give it any thought. Currently, most people mean by faith something like the "reasons of the heart" or some vague credo that gets you through the day. The orthodox view among many moderns is that faith and knowledge are opposites. Faith is a leap in the dark where we all grasp onto something that gives our life meaning. But this faith is not empirically based, nor does it rest on a foundation that passes intellectual muster. It doesn't really correspond to any external reality; and many people, at least in the secular West, appear to be okay with that.

What does this have to do with our Gospel this morning? Just this. New Testament faith begins with trust and confidence in a Person. It is not something we merely conjure up because it makes us feel good. But even that is an incomplete account of what Jesus taught about faith.

As Jesus neared Jerusalem he continued to work miracles and to show mercy and to call on the people to have faith in God, by which he meant to trust, love, and worship God. It so happened that Jesus and his disciples were about to enter a village when ten lepers cried out to him to have mercy on them. Luke is careful to point out that they "stood at a distance." Lepers were not permitted to approach anyone, and they had to remain outside the village. But they had obviously heard that Jesus was a powerful healer full of mercy and kindness. They had a very simple request, and they couched it in the most respectful language they could find. They addressed him as "Master" and begged for mercy. Cries for mercy were commonplace in Jesus' ministry. Jesus looked at them and told them to go

and show themselves to the priests, just as the Law in Leviticus required. And as they went their way they were cleansed of the disease.

All of these men had some faith in Jesus. They called him “Master” and they acted on his directions. Obviously, a leper would not show himself to a priest until his was healed; but Jesus told them to go on to the priests before the healing had occurred. If they were healed, the priest would certify that they were cleansed and allowed to return to their family and friends in the village. They believed that Jesus could and would heal them, and so they acted on his command and all ten of them were in fact healed.

But as we know, there is always a twist coming in the New Testament narratives, some sort of reversal, and an epiphany that the first hearers of the Gospel would quickly identify. Faith in Jesus, saving faith, the kind of faith that makes a person whole is not only confidence that he can and will work miracles. The kind of faith Jesus expected then and still expects today will be identified not only by confidence in Jesus’ extraordinary power to heal and restore, but one having the qualities of worship and gratitude. “And one of them when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at his feet giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan.”

There’s the twist. Ten lepers were healed but only one expressed gratitude for his healing and returned to Jesus to give him thanks and praise. The word Luke uses is one of his favorites, the Greek word *doxazo* which means to celebrate, to praise, to honor. We usually translate it as “praise” or “glorify.” Where before he and the other nine could only stand at a distance, Luke’s account has him coming right up to Jesus. This is another reversal. By coming within reach of Jesus he showed his confidence in his healing and restoration to human society. His approach to Jesus also visually shows his state of grace. The space between the former leper and God has dramatically shrunk. The space between God and the other nine who were healed continues to widen. Once the Samaritan was a stranger to God, but now he has been brought close by Jesus the Son of God. By identifying the one person who returned to give glory to God as a stranger, an outsider, Jesus also identifies at least some of the other nine as Jews. This points out the unfortunate fact that so many children of the Covenant walked away from Jesus. St. John put it this way: “he came unto his own and his own received him not.” This is another reversal. The ones who were expected to respond with praise and gratitude received him not. But it turns out to be the schismatic, the one who was far from the promises of the Covenant, who ends up with the blessing at the feet of the Son of God.

“Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?” Jesus’s questions are really a condemnation. He wasn’t expecting an answer from his disciples or anyone else. He rhetorically indicted the nine for not responding to God’s gracious act. They did not receive the blessing that was meant for the Children of Promise. It went instead to the stranger: “thy faith hath made thee whole.”

Miracles do not create the kind of faith Jesus says will make us whole. They do not make people into faithful Christians. Nor is saving faith something we can decide to have after all of our questions are answered. Nor is it merely something we parade around as an

identity marker in the culture wars. It is a trust issuing in a loving response to God based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Out of our small steps in faith grows the conviction that we are loved, just as the woman who is certain her husband loves her. We come over time to see ourselves as the Bride of Christ. This should make us continually thankful people. We are not people waiting, with arms folded, for certainty to be delivered unto us before we commit. As finite beings, we are required to trust before we can know. Trusting and knowing are inextricably linked. This is a truth taught from St. Augustine all the way through Wittgenstein and beyond. That Samaritan leper, in trusting in God, began to truly know Him. And to know God is to fall at His feet in love and praise.

In the Name...